

**NIGERIA
AND
THE CLASSICS**

Journal of the Department of Classics,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

Vol. 29

2015/16

**NIGERIA
AND
THE CLASSICS**

ISSN 118-1990

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A REVIEW OF PHIL NWOKO'S *DANCING WITH THE OSTRICH*

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D*ancing with the Ostrich* is a gripping story of two young individuals, who struggle to find solace from the twists and turns of life. It is also a story that revolves round the metaphor of the family, as a world, which, in most cases, is suddenly fragmented and distorted by unanticipated happenstances. It is indeed a story of failed nationhood, whereby citizens experience unfamiliarity and disillusionment in a morally decadent society. It is a story of passion, of love and ache. It is a story about all mankind, young or old, rich or poor, at one stage of one's existence or the other.

This 271-page novel is not just an interesting piece of literature. It is a collection of resounding metaphors for every phase of humanity. In other words, this remarkable story connects to each and every one of us in more ways than we can imagine. Its significance lies in the revelation of purpose in life; as individuals and as a nation. It exposes the reader to the consciousness of salient principles of life such as faith, hope, character, freedom, kindness, dreams, aspiration and love, especially in this fast-paced world that is closely gravitates towards self-destruction.

Dancing with the Ostrich revolves round a beautiful, hardworking and intelligent girl, Benita, who sacrifices her academic pursuit to help her mother and siblings survive the economic hardship that besieges her family. Having initially lived and schooled in Lagos, Benita and her family are forced back to

the village community after her father's tragic death. Poor, lonely and disillusioned about life, Benita strives to do just one thing, and that is to make her family comfortable as much as she can. It is from this decision that she eventually finds lasting happiness, hope and, love. In search of water for her family, she encounters her fate which eventually becomes her destiny.

This story is set in Ncharaelu, a community in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. For its inhabitants, the twin problems of lack of electricity and unavailability of clean water are their albatross. At the metaphorical level of interpretation, Ncharaelu is a reflection of contemporary Nigerian society. The novel sporadically foregrounds the lack of these basic amenities as a crime against humanity. However, instead of the usual focus on government as the cause-solution to these dire issues, the novel becomes self-reflexive, in which individuals respond in their own way of finding solutions to the overwhelming lack of basic societal amenities. Therefore, the unique selling proposition about this novel is the optimistic trail of thought that envelops the reader, in relation to decisions and actions of the characters. Despite their hardships, the characters in the novel find ways to ameliorate the pains and losses by helping one another. In fact, in doing so, they are able to reconcile their turbulent past and finally find peace and tranquility through unwavering extension of a helping hand to the helpless and the needy.

Such is the fortune of Mazi Daniel, a rich and kind-hearted widower, who is known throughout the community for his benevolence. Rather than withdraw to himself, he allows people to come and fetch water from his large farmland. A farmer by profession, he supplies water and organic waste for other poor farmers in the community to benefit from. It is from his compound that Benita gets water for her family; she also gets peace and satisfaction from watching the most exotic bird on the farmland, the ostrich. Benita's love, knowledge about and devotion for the ostriches catch the attention of Nonso, the only surviving child of Mazi Daniel, who had lost four other children, including his wife, in an accident. Nonso manages to convince his father to employ Benita, who he argues knows so much about ostriches. Eventually, Benita does not only add immeasurably to the farm, she becomes the joyful constituent in their gapping

hearts, that stream of happiness that eluded rich Mazi Daniel and his son for years.

...I have heard so much about that man (Mazi Daniel). There are so many good things about him. All the stories I have heard about him are about helping the less privileged. Nobody has ever said any negative thing about him. (40)

Even in Mazi Daniel's absence, he was able to get a good report from other individuals from his community. From the above excerpt, it is easy to distill Mazi Daniel's altruistic personality, earnestness and patriotic disposition to his community. Even when Madam Nkechi, Benita's mother remained skeptical about Benita working on Mazi Daniel's farm, Father Kaji, the catholic priest, stood up for him.

Several significant issues arise from this extraordinary piece of literature. First, this novel fundamentally addresses the theme of selflessness and mentorship which is fast disappearing from our society. Mazi Daniel's character is a shining example to all and sundry. He represents the ideal father figure, a role model and a courageous mentor to people who hitherto had no future expectation and no hope of survival in the ordeal of life. He and his son recognize the resourcefulness in Benita. Unlike what occurs in this present-day society, they choose not to kill her potentials. Instead, they groom, nurture and elevate her miserable condition into purposeful path, providing her with comfort and freedom.

Furthermore, *Dancing with the Ostrich* deconstructs the literary representation of African men as dictatorial beasts. Feminists such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, and the like focus on vivid description of the depressive state of women in the society. Their novels are preoccupied with the travails of women, directly or indirectly putting the blame on the male chauvinistic society. Perhaps the most volatile of all is *The Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie. This novel portrays strong stereotypic conclusions that define African men as inconsiderate, barbaric, power-driven, irrationally vicious and extremely oppressive. The character of Mazi Daniel rises to the occasion to deconstruct these negative expletives that classically fit into the description of Kambili's father, Eugene, in *Purple*

Hibiscus. More significant is Nonso's vow to affirm his father's reputation. The text speaks

His interest was to help the girl and her family and he had vowed that he would fight anybody whose intention was just to take advantage of her. He would never allow that. He must protect her. (110)

The presence of this sympathetic and compassionate character in Mazi Daniel's son, Nonso, is symbolic. It surely represents a continuous process of female recognition that is becoming widespread across the Nigerian nation. The male characters in the novel are depicted as kind, generous, respectful, although strict at times when necessary. They serve well as protectors, providers, and as spiritual, moral and intellectual guides. This novel practically documents this important variation and therefore remains pivotal in the positive representations of males in contemporary African feminist fiction.

In addition, there is also a progressive change in the characterization of women. In this novel, that Benita rises from grass to grace is an understatement. This trend is different when compared to Mama, Pa Eugene's wife, in *Purple Hibiscus* who ended up in prison or Nnu Ego, who never experienced the joys of motherhood till her sad demise. Therefore, the depiction of women is positively presented in Nwoko's maiden novel. Although there is the acknowledgement of the good nature of men, as husbands, and as fathers, it is certainly not yet uhuru. Benita's mother, having being rescued by men of dignity and integrity, asserts: "My dear, there are just a few good men in this world... it is only a few women that are lucky to get men who remain true to the end" (226). This text challenges us to choose to be among the few, with a solemn expectation that one day, that few will become many.

However, irrespective of Mazi Daniel's exemplary character, Nonso still struggles with certain inconsistencies that are quite peculiar to young men. Inherently, Nonso is kind-hearted, generous and considerate. However, his actions sometimes are contradictory to his true feelings as a result of his impatience, anger and his disposition to always be in control. Often times, Mazi Daniel cleverly wades into disputes between Nonso and

Benita. At a metaphorical level of interpretation, Nwoko saliently projects the need for young people to learn from the mistakes and experiences of older generations in order to experience peaceful and a long-lasting relationship. This theme becomes pertinent, given the rising rate of divorce that now characterise many African societies. Benita, on the other hand, commensurately displays level-headedness, patience and aptitude in her relationship with Nonso. Nwoko, through the character of Benita, denounces radical feminism as the way out of any male chauvinistic relationship. Through her positive disposition, she experiences peace of mind and fulfillment, while acknowledging the 'men' in her life as the primary source.

As she travelled back in the long Toyota Coaster commuter bus which was filled with all kinds of people, she ruminated on so many things... the 'grace to grass' era of her early youth and then, the rise from 'grass to grace' which had become her lot.. then her mind returned to her bunch of joy - her twin sons and husband. (270)

In terms of its narrative style and language structure, the novel showcases in few instances unnecessary repetitions that seem to strain the plot structure. These unlike scenarios reduce suspense and could lose the interest of the reader. There are also some grammatical errors that should be addressed in subsequent prints. Nonetheless, the story is highly captivating and morally enriching. The message is multifaceted and clear. The language soothes every cadre of readers, irrespective of the level of educational attainment. Its simple syntactic structure is in fact a symbolic representation of the simplicity of life, the harmony in nature and the principle of modesty that every being ought to characterise. According to Coco Chanel, and I quote, "simplicity is the keynote of all true elegance".

The value that *Dancing with the Ostrich* brings cannot be overemphasized, especially in relation to African ways of life. The theme of communal thrust reverberates through the novel. Like in *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoko foregrounds the communal nature of the African society. This is seen in the way and manner Mazi Daniel interacts and supports everyone that lived in his house, right from his own son to the least of the house

attendance. Although Achebe rightly predicted the division of the African clan, Nwoko refuses to give into that prediction. The value of African culture is further illustrated through revered traditional practices, such as marriage ceremonies and so on. Through her novel, Nwoko teaches Africans to find that right balance between African values and Western civilization; she reconstructs an ideal modernist African world in the twenty-first century.

In conclusion, *Dancing with the Ostrich* addresses prevalent individual and collective struggles in our depraved society. It however strongly asserts that the solution starts from generous contributions of milk of human kindness from everyone, for our world to become safe and better. *Dancing with the Ostrich* simply reminds us today of the simplicity of life. Mahatma Gandhi states that “the greatness of humanity is not in being human, but in being humane” in everything that we do, and to everyone that we meet. This is one of the lasting legacies that *Dancing with the Ostrich* brings to us today.